

PORTO BELLO
Queens Creek, Camp Peary Military Reservation
Williamsburg vicinity
York County
Virginia

HABS VA-1367
VA, 100-WIL. V, 1-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PORTO BELLO

HABS No. VA-1367

Name: Porto Bello

Location: Porto Bello is located near Queens Creek, sited within the Camp Peary Military Reservation, in York County, Virginia. Camp Peary is located nearby the city of Williamsburg. (UTM coordinates for the property are as follows: 18: 354350/4129460, 18: 354340/4129200, 18: 354020/4129200, 18: 354020/4129470).

Present Owner,
Present Occupant,
Present Use: As part of the Camp Peary Military Reservation, Porto Bello is owned, occupied, and used by the Department of Defense of the United States Government.

Significance: While the property known as Porto Bello is identifiable in the colonial record as early as when Alexander Spotswood occupied the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg and as late as its ownership by the last royal governor, John Murray Lord Dunmore, the present house was most likely built around 1800. Even so, Porto Bello is an important artifact from the late colonial period and speaks to domestic and agricultural life in early Virginia.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

A. Ownership history

Porto Bello is an historic two-story structure made of brick; it is located within the confines of the Armed Forces Experimental Training Activity at Camp Peary in York County Virginia. The exact construction date, builder, and origin of the name "Porto Bello" are uncertain, however. Tradition holds, and is supported by the genealogies compiled of early American families, that Colonel Cornelius Collier (1720-1810), son of John Collier of York County, may have built the house Porto Bello as a hunting lodge. Cornelius Collier was a member of a Virginia Militia unit which accompanied British Admiral Edward Vernon on the 1740-42 expedition against pirates at Porto Bello harbor in Cartagena.¹ Other records report the 1754 marriage of Frances Collier, sister of Cornelius Collier of Porto Bello,² and an undated marriage of "... a daughter of Benj. Collier of the Peninsula, who was a son of John Collier, of Porto Bello."³

Confusion, however, persists in published references and secondary sources as to the exact origin of Porto Bello. In one of the more intriguing examples, William Buckner McGroarty recounts coming across a reference which stated that "Governor Spotswood (circa 1717) had a country place near Williamsburg, called Porto Bello, and built by him." McGroarty goes on to say that pencilled in the margin of this particular book, The Seldens of

Virginia by Mary Selden Kennedy were the lines ““Old hunting lodge of Cornelius Collier’; the last word, almost illegible, may be ‘Cather,’ or a similar name beginning with the letter C.”⁴

Later York County records (1758) list a court ordered sale of Porto Bello by John James Hullette to Alexander Finnie of Williamsburg. Complex court proceedings seem to indicate that Hullette lost a suit against him alleging “deceitful gambling.”⁵

Finnie, Adjutant to the Middle District of the Virginia Colony, plagued by insurmountable debt, advertised Porto Bello for sale in March 1769, listing, among other assets slaves, farm livestock, its fine oyster rock, and “one of the finest orchards upon the continent...” However, by the following May Finnie had died at Porto Bello, and by 1773, so had a subsequent owner, William Drummond, who may have been the great grandson of William Drummond who was executed in 1676 in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion.⁶

On 28 November 1773, Drummond’s widow Rachel sold Porto Bello. Her agent in the transaction was her brother, John Tyler, father of the future tenth President of the United States. Porto Bello’s purchaser was John Murray, Earl of Dunmore and last royal governor of Colonial Virginia. Governor Dunmore seems to have used the estate as a retreat and hunting lodge. Tradition has it that at Porto Bello he entertained many of the leading dignitaries of the time. Tradition also persists that on at least two occasions, 23 November 1773 and 26 May 1774, George Washington visited Dunmore at Porto Bello and dined with him there. However, Washington’s diary entries are unclear on this matter, referring vaguely to the governor’s “farm” without specifying whether this was Porto Bello or “Old Farm,” a separate estate Dunmore listed on his claim of losses due to the revolution.⁷

On the eve of the American Revolution, Dunmore’s authority in Williamsburg became more and more tenuous, and in June 1775, he and his family boarded a British warship in the York River. Accounts differ over whether Dunmore’s party embarked at Porto Bello or at Yorktown. But a 14 July 1775 report in the Virginia Gazette (Purdie) makes it clear that after the Governor’s Palace in Williamsburg had been broken into several times, Dunmore’s domestic staff fled to Porto Bello. Tradition also has it that during a subsequent visit to Porto Bello, Dunmore and his retinue were interrupted by an armed group of patriots and had to make a hasty escape, leaving behind two of their party to face capture.

Dunmore never regained control of the colony, and on 15 June 1776 the Virginia Convention seized his possessions and estates, including Porto Bello. In his postwar claim for losses, Dunmore claimed 579 acres of “land in high cultivation with valuable orchards, known by the names of Porto Bello and the Old Farm, in the County of York... Two dwelling houses at Porto Bello, with kitchens and other offices...Buildings at Porto Bello newly erected. A large barn, outhouses, stables, fattening house, workshops, etc.”⁸

After a three year period during which Porto Bello was rented out, it was again advertised for sale in November 1779. Records of the sale have not been found, but the next identifiable owner was Francis Bright, a Revolutionary War naval captain whose family occupied the estate for three generations.

Bright's son (or son-in-law, the records are not clear) Samuel F. Bright maintained the property as a farm, and kept detailed account ledgers between 1828 and 1861. He lists corn, wheat, castor beans, lamb, pork, oysters, and timber among the farm's produce. He also lists twenty-six Negro slaves in 1828, thirty-nine in 1838, and twenty-six again in 1848.⁹

Samuel F. Bright's daughter Susan H. Bright occupied the house with her husband William L. Henley in the 1850s. Here too, the published references and secondary sources are contradictory. In her Porto Bello article for the October 1961 edition of the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, so far the most comprehensive treatment of Porto Bello, Helen Campbell reports that Henley was assigned responsibility for locating sites for Confederate fortifications at the outbreak of the Civil War. However, her own source for this information, a footnote in the William and Mary Quarterly, states that Henley "was employed by President Tyler in locating forts, etc., etc."¹⁰ Such a vaguely stated activity could have easily occurred fifteen years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Porto Bello apparently played no significant role in the Civil War. A hint, however, of the impact of the war on the farm and its families may be glimpsed in 4 June 1862 letter to Mrs. Mowbray Hammond in New Village, Long Island, New York. Written by a Henley relative at Porto Bello, M.O. Hammond, the letter cites "severity from the Northern Army's passing as it desolated the country" during the Peninsula Campaign.¹¹

Several other owners apparently continued to operate Porto Bello as a farm marginally until a fire gutted the building in 1915, leaving only the strong brick walls standing. The reconstruction of Porto Bello by the T.R. Daley family after the fire significantly changed the architecture and appearance of the house, including the addition of an east wing kitchen and a carriage house approximately twenty yards east of the main structure.

In the mid-1920s, the Tuders rented the property and were the last family to both live on and farm the land. In a 1972 newspaper article, surviving Tuder family members remembered that the farm was nearly self-sufficient, still providing oysters, in addition to corn, alfalfa, soy beans, and vegetables, some of which made their way to Williamsburg markets.

They mentioned that water was provided by an artesian well east of the house, and although water from the well was forced to a storage tank by a ramp pump, the system never provided sufficient pressure to the second floor. A "Delco plant" was designed to provide electrical power in the 1920s. A small outbuilding houses shelves of large glass jars of wet battery cells connected in a series to a circuit running to the buildings, "but it never worked. We had to use kerosene lamps."¹²

In 1942, Porto Bello and 11,000 acres around it in the Bruton District was taken by the U.S. Navy under the War Powers Act for the site of the Navy's first Seabee training center, Camp Peary. The Seabees departed Camp Perry in 1944, and after the war some families were able to return briefly to areas of the Bruton District.

Ruth Southard remembers living in the house in 1947-52 as a daughter of a Virginia state forester. Hers was the last family to use Porto Bello as a home. She described a white picket fence that bordered both the main house and the carriage house, with her family occupying both houses. She remembers the artesian well, but adds that by 1947 the electricity source was from a generator.¹³

Currently the house is on the Virginia and National list of Historic Landmarks and stands vacant and boarded up.

B. Historical Context

Despite alterations, especially following the 1915 fire, Porto Bello has endured for two hundred years and has been added to the Virginia Registry of Historic Places. It stands as a link not only to political events and colonial lifestyle in Virginia on the eve of the American Revolution, but also to the lifestyle and contributions of agricultural families in the first half of the nineteenth century through the Civil War. Not only does the availability of such documents as the Bright family ledgers and the Civil War-era letter from Porto Bello reinforce the value of the structure, also, the relevance of these documents is enhanced by the continued existence of Porto Bello.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION:

A. General statement

1. Architectural character

The present building known as Porto Bello is widely believed to not be the same structure owned by Hullette, Finnie, Drummond or Dunmore. Rather, such experienced archaeologists as Ivor Noel Hume and other architectural historians believe that the present building was constructed around 1800, perhaps reusing the bricks from the original Porto Bello house.

2. Condition and integrity of structure

The present structure is sturdy and capable of sustaining rehabilitation. Although the interior was altered when rebuilt after the 1915 fire, a floor plan drawn from the memory of Mrs. Margaret Daley Mahone, and published in 1961, could form the basis for renovation, should the current owner decide to renovate.¹⁴

B. Exterior description

The overall dimensions are 102.2.0 x 17.0.5. The ground floor exterior walls are made of Flemish bond brick two layers thick. The second floor walls are formed by the tin mansard roof.

A small, two column front porch evident in the pre-1915 photograph has been replaced by a larger, four column front porch. Although the deck has disappeared, four strong 8x8 columns continue to support the porch roof.

The current brick chimney is an L-shaped structure rebuilt between the original east elevation and the kitchen addition, having moved from its former central location.

The ground floor has three windows on the south elevation, measuring 6.7.0 x 3.6.0; one window on the east elevation, measuring 5' x 3'; three windows on the north elevation, measuring 6.7.0 x 3.6.0; and one window on the west elevation, measuring 6.4.6 x 3.7.4. All ground floor windows are boarded up and topped with brick jack arches, with the date 1801 molded into one of the bricks above the jack arch over the ground floor window on the west elevation. The south elevation has a main entry wooden door (padlocked) with modern trim, measuring 7.10.0 x 4.5.0 topped by a brick jack arch bisected by a wooden right angle. The east elevation features a 7.3.0 x 3.3.0 wooden doorway (boarded up) to the kitchen, situated above four layers of new brick, semicircular, Williamsburg Revival-style steps.

The second floor has three windows each in the south and north elevations, and one window on the west elevation. All are set into the 8.1.0 tin mansard roof, and all are boarded up.

The post-1915 kitchen is joined to the original building by quoined bricks.

C. Interior description

The first floor includes a bedroom at the west elevation with a private bath against the north elevation; a living room with a wooden stairway leading toward the north elevation, rising five steps to a landing, turning right against the wall and continuing up to the second floor;¹⁵ a fireplace in the wall between the living room and the kitchen on the right; a dining room in the southeast corner of the addition; and a kitchen in the northeast corner. The walls are plaster and the wooden trim is modern and plain.

Upstairs is a large bedroom at the west end of the hall, a small bedroom and closet at the east end, and a bathroom between the bedrooms.

Most of the plumbing fixtures and electrical outlets have been removed.

D. Site description

1. Landscape

According to Southard, evidence of an old garden could be found in the woods across the lane about forty yards from the west elevation of the main house. Oral tradition holds that the garden may have been installed by Dunmore or even earlier. Southard also states that the creek bank was steeper when her family lived there. She also

revealed, and visual inspection confirmed evidence, that the lane originally did not encircle Porto Bello, but led past the back, or north elevation.

A small family burial plot is situated about fifty yards from Porto Bello. The only grave still visible is that of Susan H. Bright, wife of Samuel F. Bright. However, tradition holds that in the past, three graves were evident. The William and Mary Quarterly reports that Elianna Maria Jerdone Southal Bright, Samuel's second wife, died 21 July 1839 and was buried at Porto Bello. The William and Mary Quarterly also reports that Francis Peyton Bright, an infant son of Elianna, died two months later, on 28 September 1839. While the William and Mary Quarterly does not add that little Francis was buried at Porto Bello, this would be a logical identity for the unknown third burial.¹⁶

2. Carriage house

Southard believes that the carriage house may have been built as late as the 1930s. It is clearly constructed of newer brick. The west elevation of the carriage house features a faintly discernable, garage door-sized brick pattern around the window. More obvious is the brick pattern, including a jack arch, where an entry door had once been.

The carriage house is completely sealed up. Southard says its interior had plaster walls, and included two bedrooms, a bath, kitchen, dining room, and living room that faced the creek.

Historian: Anonymous; report date, 1997-98.
(Note: At the time, the contact for the HABS office was Frederick J. Lindstrom, HABS Architect; however, other details of the project and its intended donation to the collection prior to the acceptance of the report in 1997-98 have disappeared from office memory).

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

A. Architectural drawings:

1. Porto Bello and the carriage house, supplied by Armed Forces Experimental Training Activity.
2. Field drawings of Porto Bello and the carriage house, sketched by the author.

B. Photography

1. Porto Bello, the carriage house, and the burials, from the Armed Forces Experimental Training Activity, April 1997.

2. Porto Bello, before the 1915 fire, Virginia Historical Society.

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated

1. Library of Virginia
2. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
3. Interview with former owner, Richard Mahone

E. Endnotes

¹ Stella Pickett Hardy, Colonial Families of the Southern States of America, 2nd ed., pp. 148, 156.

² Col. James Edmonds Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama (New Orleans, 1899; reprint, Baltimore: 1969), pp. 256, 443.

³ Ibid, p. 449.

⁴ William Buckner McGroarty, "The Mouth of the Massaponax," Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine vol. 13 (1932): 180-181.

⁵ Helen J. Campbell, "Porto Bello: Bruton Parish, York County, Virginia," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography vol. 69, no. 4 (October 1961): 461.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 460, 464-465.

⁷ Donald Jackson, ed., The Diaries of George Washington vol. 3, 1771-1775, 1780-1781 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), pp. 216, 251.

⁸ Schedule of Losses Sustained by the Earl of Dunmore, His Majesty's Late Governor of the Colony of Virginia, 27 February 1784, London Public Record Office, Audit Office 13, Bundle 28, No. 550. (Library of Congress)

⁹ Account Books of Samuel F. Bright, 1828-1861 and 1838-1861, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

¹⁰ Campbell, op. cit., p. 466; William and Mary Quarterly, 1st series, vol. 1 (1892-1893): 151.

¹¹ Letter from Porto Bello, Henley Papers, MSS2H 1845 al, Virginia Historical Society.

¹² Roger A. Crescentini, "York Plantation Site May Achieve National Historic Designation," Times Herald (Newport News) 25 April 1972.

¹³ Ruth Southard, oral interview, 27 February 1997.

¹⁴ Campbell, op. cit., p. 467.

¹⁵ Southard said that the banister was replaced after her family moved out, and that the original banister may have been appropriated by someone for their personal use.

¹⁶ William and Mary Quarterly, 1st series, vol. 12, pp. 32-33.

F. Bibliography

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Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine, vol. 13.

William and Mary Quarterly, 1st series, vols. 8 and 12.

York County Deed Books 6, 7, 15, 16, 29, 31, 53, 59.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The historical report was researched, written, and then donated to the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record collection in 1997-98.